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Proctor American Legion Post 6 Baseball History



Proctor Post 6 American Legion baseball team at St. Peter's Field about 1976. Head Coach Wade Mitchell walks back from the mound and Rick DelBianco.

About the Author

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Introduction

For many years, the Proctor High School athletic teams have compiled an impressive number of championship teams. Highly talented high school athletes have brought home State Championship awards after winning titles in soccer, basketball, and baseball. However, the community of Proctor also fielded teams for many years in a summer youth baseball program, of which people may be completely unaware or perhaps may have forgotten about as time has passed. This was the Proctor Post 6 American Legion Baseball Program. Sadly it is not possible to document a complete picture of the Post 6 baseball teams of the past. Factual records do not appear to exist, and with time, some forty, fifty, or sixty years later, many coaches, players, and parents of players have departed this life. Moreover, the memories of those, who may have been involved, might have become obscured by the passing of time. This history of Proctor Post 6 American Legion Baseball may somewhat resemble a one thousand piece puzzle, which has about two-thirds of its pieces missing. Nonetheless, it will at least serve to preserve the fact that the program did exist at various intervals over the years in this small community. Moreover, this document may serve as a faint footpath from which others may set out to further refine the Post 6 team history. If you possess any special memories or pertinent documentation concerning Post 6 American Legion Baseball, please feel free to share it with the Rutland Historical Society.

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Proctor American Legion Post 6 Baseball History

By David G. Zsido

As "The Great War" ended on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month in 1918, millions of American Veterans returned to their hometowns across the United States to resume their lives. More than fifty years earlier as their fore-fathers, who had served in the Union Army, were returning from the Civil War Battlefields, they had realized the vision of then creating a Veterans organization. This was established as the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), which among several functions, also served as a lobbying group to represent Veterans Rights with Congress. Similarly, the Veterans of World War I also perceived a need to band together in comradeship to preserve their memories and associations from the European battlefields. Moreover, during the years that followed, they stood together to ensure and safeguard their Veteran benefits. Within a few months of the signing of the armistice that formally ended "The Great War", the groundwork was laid by four rather high-ranking officers to establish what we recognize today as the American Legion. It is generally accepted that the founding of the American Legion occurred during a three-day period from 13 to 15 March in 1919. Rapidly during the months that followed its birth, American Legion posts began populating the United States.

The Proctor American Legion Post, Post 6, was organized during the early summer of 1919. Fortunately a copy of the original application for charter has been preserved and is stored in the 'Vermont Room' of the Proctor Free Library. Although it has not been formally documented, it appears that the various Post numbers in a given State were assigned in the chronological order of which they were filed and received by the various State Departments of American Legion. This would imply that Proctor Post 6 was the sixth chartered American Legion Post in the State of Vermont. The Post 6 charter application was executed on 19 June 1919. This required the signatures of no less than fifteen veterans, who attested that they had served in the military between the dates of 6 April 1917 and 11 November 1918. One notable signature on line three of the roster of qualifying names was Mortimer R. Proctor. While fifteen names were required, the application contained thirty names. One of the earliest activities of the young Post was to become the operator of the local skating rink; a duty which the Legionnaires undertook in 1926.

By 1932, the Post 6 membership had grown to some 150 Legionnaires. From all accounts, Post 6 never actually had its own clubrooms. The Town of Proctor allowed the local Legion Post to utilize a small room at the back of the town office building for its office and meetings.



A back room in the Proctor Town Office building was the home of Post 6 of the American Legion.

The small Post continued to serve the veterans of the community until 1991, when Henry E. Duskett was the final Post Commander. Sadly, none of the records from Post 6 could be located. Whether these records were lost, misfiled, or otherwise destroyed; clearly only a scant few documents could be found. Local resident and former long-time Vermont Marble Company employee, Andrew 'Andy' Allard, contacted the town clerk to ascertain whether the records had simply been moved downstairs to the town clerk's office. He was advised that there weren't any such records there. Communications with the American Legion Department of Vermont Adjutant, Donald Tatro, also proved fruitless. However, he was able to provide a listing of the Post 6 Commanders from 1945 to 1991, as well as, some of the other Post 6 officers.

Nationally, as the American Legion ranks grew in the years that followed World War I, so did many of its programs. These programs included those, which would help to foster a sense of duty to the Community, State, and Nation.

The concept of American Legion Junior Baseball was introduced as a nationwide program in 1925. It provided high school boys between the ages of 15 and 19 the opportunity to participate in this summer sport. During the 1926 American Legion Baseball Season, some 15 States had Legion Departments, which offered Legion Baseball. Some of the desired goals of the program were to develop and foster a principle of solid sportsmanship; to maintain good health; and to stimulate active citizenship among the young players. Over the many years which followed, countless numbers of Legion Baseball 'graduates' ultimately went on to not only participate as players in Major League Baseball, but also continued on to be inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame.

The concept of American Legion Junior Baseball appeared to take root in Vermont just in time for the 1928 season. This was confirmed with information contained in the 2017 American Legion Department of Vermont's organizational program, which former long-time Rutland Post 31 Baseball Coach, Bill Flory obtained. Although Bill retired from active coaching many years earlier, he has continuously remained active with the Department of Vermont - Legion Baseball oversight. The 2017 program contained a complete listing of the championship teams from 1928 through 2016. However, there was a three-year period, during World War II, when apparently Legion Baseball wasn't played in Vermont. Those years extended from 1943 through 1945.

Moreover, from its 1928 commencement in Vermont until the post-World War II years, it appears that Junior Legion Baseball was predominantly limited to the Northern Region of Vermont. The subsequent growth in the program throughout Vermont, which followed World War II, may have been associated with the influx in the ranks of various Vermont American Legion Posts with veterans who served during World War II.

Within the archives of the 'Vermont Room' of the Proctor Library, there is a folder containing information on the Proctor Post 6 American Legion Baseball Team. Unfortunately the photographs, which are believed to be of the Post 6 teams prior to World War II, are undocumented. They lacked any indication on the players' uniforms identifying them as Post 6 players. They appear to be Proctor High School players from an era that may even pre-date the advent of Junior Legion Baseball in 1928. Nancy Kennedy, who oversees the 'Vermont Room', did quickly locate two references of Proctor Post 6 that were published in the Vermont Marble Company's monthly employee newsletter, 'Marble Chips'. The December 1947 issue speaks extensively of the Post 6 activity with providing a safe public ice-skating rink. However, it is completely silent about any program of Junior Legion Baseball. Nonetheless, the November 1956 issue of 'Marble Chips' does clearly

mention that Post 6 was involved with Junior Legion Baseball during the summer of 1956.

For a small Legion Post, such as Post 6, undertaking a Legion Baseball Program was a substantial effort. Some of these requirements included: finding volunteers to coach and administer to the needs of the players and maintain the field; obtaining the necessary funding to provide uniforms and equipment; and having an adequate source of players to fill a team's roster. Post 6 always considered Warner Field, which is somewhat bounded by Park Street and Olympus Street, as its home field.

This is the same athletic field, which the Proctor High School teams use for other outdoor athletic events. Although Proctor High School was



Warner Field in early 20th Century.

always able to fill a complete roster for its varsity baseball program, at times Post 6 would encounter some difficulty in filling its roster. This could have been due to a couple of reasons. Often the young high school boys may have found it necessary to acquire summertime employment to assist with the family's financial needs. Then too, with the age overlap between Legion Baseball and Babe Ruth Baseball, some thirteen-year old boys may have opted to play Babe Ruth instead of Legion Baseball. To accommodate the potential shortfall in mustering a team, Post 6 was allowed to 'draft' players from the neighboring Towns of Pittsford and West Rutland. This may have created a personal challenge of sorts with West Rutland players. Considering the strong interscholastic rivalry, which existed between Proctor High School and West Rutland High School, some West Rutland players did not feel comfortable playing for Proctor Post 6. Notwithstanding these issues, there appeared to have been at least three distinct eras of Proctor Post 6 Legion Baseball.

The first of these commenced at some point following the end of World War II. A second period began in 1955 and continued into the mid-

1960s. The third and what became the final chapter started in 1976 and extended into the 1980s. The most obscure of these three eras is Proctor's initial entry into the Legion Baseball Program. In neighboring Rutland, Post 31 perhaps first fielded a Legion Team in 1947. However, it does not appear that Post 6 mustered a team at that same time. Factual information is extremely scarce. In a rather obscure piece of microfilm containing a copy of the 20 June 1950 *Rutland Herald*, a sports account appears to list Proctor as one of the Legion Baseball Teams for that year. Moreover, this was somewhat further documented in a subsequent 1955 *Rutland Herald* sports report. It references the fact that Proctor Post 6 had a Legion Baseball team prior to 1955. The 16 June 1955 sports story about the opening of the Legion Baseball season with a game between Proctor Post 6 and Rutland Post 31 stated the following: "Proctor Post No. 6, absent from league competition for a number of years, is expected to field a strong team composed of several from this year's high school team and bolstered by some players from Pittsford High."

Fortunately with the onset of the 1955 Legion Baseball season, the sports account as written in the *Rutland Herald* provided complete details of the Proctor Team roster. Raymond 'Lefty' Olson coached the team and continued on as the team coach through the 1961 season. His initial roster of players from 1955 included: Bob Landon in left field; Bill Duprey at second base; Jim Palmer the catcher; Dave Reissig the pitcher or right field; Dick Gecha at first base; Gary Gurbacs at short-stop; John Gecha at third base or pitching; Dave Ratti catcher or in center field; Bernie Poremski in right field or pitching; Tom Lertola in right field; and Hank Champine with pitching duties. Proctor was also fortunate in that its 1955 roster also included five reserve players. These team members were Billy Allard; John Dynan Candon; Bob Illinski; Mike Illinski; and Teddy Pentkowski. In their first meeting on a June afternoon, after a tight game for the first seven innings, Rutland broke loose in the eighth inning and went on to beat Proctor by a six to three score. When the two teams met again on 7 July Rutland Post 31 once again beat Proctor in a closely matched game by a single run by a score of two to one. The rivalry between these two Legion Teams continued on for several years. Most Proctor players agreed that it was always a very special game, when Post 6 could walk off the field after beating Post 31.

Tragedy struck the community of Proctor and Proctor High School on an October night in 1956. Four Proctor High School students were killed as the result of a horrific automobile crash at a bad curve along Route 3 south of the village near the Proctor - Rutland Town line. Those, who

died, were David B. Emerson; Robert J. Illinski; Theodore L. Pentkowski; and John T. Petrulenicz. Both Robert 'Bob' Illinski and Theodore 'Teddy' Pentkowski had been players on the 1955 and 1956 Post 6 Baseball teams. A memorial tribute to Bob Illinski in the 1957 Proctor High School Yearbook in part, contained the following statement: "Baseball was his favorite sport. He spent countless hours in practice during the off-season, just waiting for baseball time to roll around again. Although his regular position was second baseman on the school and Junior Legion teams, he also did some pitching." A few years later his classmates remembered him in the 1959 Proctor High School Yearbook. In part, the dedication contained the following: "A boy who loved sports, Teddy was the stuff that champions are made of. His very name became, for his schoolmates, synonymous with good sportsmanship. A champ in every way, Teddy had all the qualities of the true athlete, and what is often even more important, the other attributes of courage, dependability, intelligence and leadership."

Coach 'Lefty' Olson was a Proctor native, who served in the U.S. Navy during World War II. His son, Raymond 'Bunny' Olson, recalled that 'Lefty' moved his family back to Proctor after his honorable discharge from the Navy. Their family home near the end of Olympus Street was probably built in 1945 or 1946. This location was nearly directly across from the Warner Field and Proctor High School athletic fields. 'Bunny' noted that perhaps his father's greatest enjoyment came from being a high school baseball umpire; something that he was extremely good at. 'Lefty' was employed, as were so many other Proctor residents at that time by the Vermont Marble Company. 'Bunny' remembered that his father had retired as a Transportation/Shipping Manager for the company. Andy Allard also recalled that 'Lefty' may have worked in a variety of positions at the Marble Company, in fact, 'Lefty' was Andy's boss there in the Service Department at one point. From what 'Bunny' remembered, Theodore Pentkowski, 'Teddy's' father, assisted 'Lefty' with his coaching duties.

'Lefty' preserved and stored the game score books and other related artifacts from his tenure; extending from 1955 to 1961. However, 'Bunny' noted that after 'Lefty' died, 'Lefty's' widow looked at the large stack of material, and asked a question or two that many people in that situation would. Her question was simply, "What should we do with this...who would want it?" Sadly, not believing that these Post 6 Legion Baseball team records were of any interest or value, they were disposed of. It was also during the late 1950s that the American Legion dropped the word 'Junior' from its baseball program. It simply became known as American Legion Baseball.

'Bunny' Olson was member of the Proctor High School Class of 1961. His mother did not want 'Bunny' to be referred to as 'Junior' all of his life, so he did not share the same middle name as his dad. She convinced her son that 'Bunny' was a suitable nickname for his middle name, Bernard, and it stuck. He began playing for the Post 6 Legion Baseball team under his father at the age of 15. Looking back to those years in the late 1950s, he reflected on the fact that several of his high school baseball teammates had to forego playing Legion ball to acquire summer jobs. He also recalled that some of the Proctor High School baseball team members were sought out as players for Rutland Post 31. The Proctor boys always regarded Post 31 as a 'powerhouse'. 'Bunny' never remembered beating Post 31. He regularly played at first base, but also was called upon periodically for pitching duties. On one occasion as the pitcher in a game at Post 37 of Bellows Falls he was facing a strong batter. During this game the umpire was calling balls and strikes from the mound behind the pitcher. The batter nailed a line drive back to the mound, which 'Bunny' ducked. The ball caught the ill-prepared umpire in his mid-section buckling him over in pain. One of 'Bunny's' most memorable games was the first time the team ever played a game 'under the lights' at the ball park in Bennington. For him and his fellow teammates it was simply a unique experience.

One of his close teammates was Charlie 'Jolly' Rogers, another Proctor High student in the Class of 1961. The nickname 'Jolly' came about in his early childhood, when a family member had seen a pirate's jolly-roger flag, and for some reason Charlie got dubbed with the name. 'Jolly' got off to an early start with Post 6 baseball based on the date of his birth. From what he remembers, he was able to play five seasons of Legion Baseball with Post 6; returning to the field during the summer after he had completed his freshman year in college. Several of the players, whom he might have played with on the same team, included many of the players from the 1955 and 1956 teams. There was one teammate in particular that 'Jolly' remembered, who was named Bernie Poremski. Bernie was a team member, who was a student at Pittsford High School. He was regarded as a rather powerful pitcher. In one game at Warner Field, when Proctor was hosting Rutland Post 31, Bernie was on the mound. He was facing a strong batter by the name of Hubie Pratt. Bernie delivered a somewhat off-speed curve ball towards home plate. In the split second it took for the pitch to arrive, Hubie's eyes got "as big as saucers", as he couldn't believe what an easy pitch was coming his way. However, in eager anticipation, Hubie got out in front of the ball a little and nailed it down the left field line just out of bounds in foul territory. As 'Jolly' recalled, the towering drive sailed deep into

left field and actually landed on the Proctor High School roof. 'Jolly' shared the same special game memory with 'Bunny'; which was playing the night game under the lights in Bennington at the former Northern League ballpark. According to reports, these lights were installed prior to the beginning of the 1950 baseball season. Moreover, 'Jolly' went on to say that the infield there was somewhat unusual. It did not have a typical sod cover, but instead was completely a dirt surface. Like 'Bunny', he was a left-handed pitcher and at times could be found at first base. He was a switch-hitting batter, but admitted that he was better as a left-handed batter. One mystery that 'Jolly' introduced was trying to recall, who hit the home-run smash, which landed inside the fenced-in tennis courts in deep center field. The names of Lee Orvis and Dave Shortsleeve came to mind but couldn't be confirmed. Peter Navari was another teammate of 'Jolly' and 'Bunny' during the late 1950s. Peter, who could be found at second base, also remembered playing under the lights as a unique experience. Moreover, Peter also recalled a baseball banquet hosted by Post 31, where they watched World Series film clips.

During the summer of 1960, John Anderson had the opportunity to play for Post 6 as a third baseman. It was his only year on the team as his family moved to Rutland. With the move, he transferred from Proctor High School to Mount Saint Joseph Academy, from which he graduated in 1963. He never played baseball for the Mounties, but was a member of the MSJ football team for three years. John spent his early childhood in Proctor, where his family's home was located on North Street.

As 'Lefty' Olson's tenure as coach came to an end in 1961, he conversed with a person, whom he considered to be a great replacement, John 'Jack' Flood. Jack was employed as a lineman in the Power Division of the Vermont Marble Company. Jack agreed to take the coaching responsibilities with one caveat; he would only do so if 'Lefty' agreed to handle all of the administrative functions. 'Lefty' was familiar with such administrative functions having also served as the Post Commander for the 1959-60 period. For Jack, this coaching opportunity was his first effort. His background in baseball was developed through his years of playing the sport for Pittsford High School, where he could be found in the infield either at third base or shortstop. However, he had a highly talented line-up of players to support his 'rookie' effort as the coach of Post 6. Some of these players included: Herb Spaulding; Bob Eugair; Bob Bushey; Jimmy Higgins; Bill Benham; Robert Curtis; John Ratti; Jim Candon; Bobby Greene; Terry Champine; Kevin Austin; and the Pentkowski brothers: Raymond and Edmund. Once again, Post 6 drew players from the neighboring communities of Pittsford and West

Rutland to bolster its roster. Jack considered Bill Boutwell to be the team's pitching 'work-horse'. Jack looked back to an important play-off game, which had Post 6 playing against Barre. In a really interesting set of circumstances, Proctor won the game by a score of one to nothing. The score was the result of the efforts of one player, Robert Curtis. He started off by being walked. Then he stole second base; and went on to steal third base as well. Unbelievably, he scored the winning run by somehow stealing home! Post 6 earned a highly successful year in 1963, when it compiled a record of nine wins and only one loss as the league champs. Jack continued on as the Post 6 coach for three years, 1962 through 1964.

One of the players from Pittsford during the Jack Flood era was Robert Eugair, who attended the recently opened Otter Valley Union High School. Bob may have shared some of the catching duties with Robert Curtis and also spent some time at shortstop. During the 1964 season, Bob reflected on a rather special game against Bellows Falls Post 37 with either Herb Spaulding or Bill Boutwell on the mound. As a well-known Post 37 slugger from Charlestown, NH was ready to take the first pitch, Jack called for time-out and walked to the mound. He had a plan, which he explained to the pitcher. So he cautioned the pitcher about this batter, saying, "Do this, but don't do that..." Jack walked back to the dugout, and the pitcher released the pitch. The batter smashed the ball, which went soaring into deep center field; so deep that it landed on Park Street and bounced against a house on the other side. The batter was Carlton 'Pudge' Fisk, who went on to become a Major League Hall of Fame catcher after playing for the Boston Red Sox and Chicago White Sox. Coach Flood returned to the mound and told the pitcher, "Don't throw that pitch again..." Eugair was one of the only players from the late 1950s to early 1960s, who had a photograph of himself in his team's uniform.

During his high school years, Robert Curtis was simply known as 'Curt' to his classmates and friends. He graduated from Proctor High School with the Class of 1964. He opted to play Legion Baseball rather than being a member of the Babe Ruth Team. 'Curt' played under Coach 'Lefty' Olson in 1961, and then under Coach Jack Flood through the summer of 1964. Routinely, 'Curt' could be found at home plate as the team's catcher. From that position he was able to observe first-hand and remembered that Post 6 had several great pitchers. Looking back to 1961, he noted that 'Bunny' Olson had an incredibly slow curve ball, which batters simply couldn't hit. He also recalled that typically 'Bunny' would pitch some five strong innings before 'Jolly' would come in to relieve him with a high-speed fastball.

'Curt' also noted that the Post 6 teams were fortunate to have other great pitchers, such as, Billy Boutwell of West Rutland and Herb Spaulding of Pittsford.

His overall reflection of those years was summed up with this recollection, "Everyone got along and played well together. There were not any 'super stars'; just a lot of strong players." Trusting his memory, he also noted that the Post 6 teams, which he played on, "beat up on



The Southwestern Vermont League champ American Legion Post 6 of Proctor pose for a team portrait. Back row: (l to r) Coach Jake Flood, Bob Greene, Bob Curtis, Ray Bushey, Terry Champine. Front row: (l to r) Herb Spaulding, Bill Benham, Ron Woods, Ed Pentowski, Jim Higgins. Sitting: (l to r) Batboys Bobby Mezzetta, Butch Bushey. Absent were Bill Boutwell, Bob Eugair and Jon Ratti.

Rutland Post 31 more than they beat up on us".

One of 'Curt's' lasting memories was created during the last year of 'Lefty's' tenure, when during many games, the team took the field with

only eight players; utilizing only two outfielders! 'Curt' was quick to point out, "The team still won games with only eight players."

After the conclusion of the 1964 Legion Baseball season, Jack Flood withdrew from his coaching responsibilities. However, subsequently he did pursue further coaching activities in Rutland by coaching his sons' Mighty Mites; Little League; and Babe Ruth teams. John R. Poljacik Sr. took on the duties for the 1965 season. John was born in Florence on November 29, 1921. He served in the Pacific Theater of Operations with the Marine Corps during World War II. Following his return home after the War, he was employed by the Howe Richardson Scale Company in Rutland as a first class machinist. However, he also spent several years as a Deputy with the Rutland County Sheriff's Department. Moreover, he was considered to be one of the key organizers of the Little League Program in Proctor. Included among the players during the summer of 1965 were several talented Proctor High School team members, who were classmates in the graduating class of 1966. These included Jim Candon; Donald Gallus; Bobby Greene; Bobby Mezzetta; and young John Poljacik, the coach's son. These classmates had also been members of the championship Babe Ruth team from the small town. In the season opening game for the Post 6, they journeyed to Hinchey Field in West Rutland on 26 June 1965. There the 'Sixers' went up against Coach Bill Flory's Rutland Post 31 team. Proctor suffered a three to one loss against the mighty Post 31 team. From all accounts, Coach Poljacik only served in that capacity for the 1965 season.

As the 1966 Legion season began, Proctor had a new coach, Bob Ward. Several of the players, who had been on the Proctor High School State Championship team in 1966, put on Post 6 uniforms only a few weeks after winning that title. However, with defensive miscues being somewhat commonplace during their first few Legion games, Post 6 suffered a couple of consecutive losses. On Sunday, 19 June 1966 the 'Sixers' were beaten by Hartford Post 26 six to four despite a strong pitching effort by Al Curtis, who tossed a four hitter. A week later, on 26 June, they traveled to Springfield and suffered another setback by a score of five to nothing. Bob Burney was on the mound for Proctor and threw a seven hitter. At second base, John Poljacik Jr. snagged a line drive, and was able to 'double up' the Springfield runner at third for a clutch play in the bottom of the first inning as the game began. However, the 'Sixers' bats were mostly silent as they were only able to muster three hits. Bobby Greene slapped a single to right field; Don Gallus blooped another single to center field; and John Poljacik nailed a single that ricocheted off the Springfield pitcher's glove.

In the few years that followed, the ability to attract team members re-emerged as a significant problem, and the program was discontin-

ued some time thereafter. A 21 June 1968 sports report at the start of the Legion Baseball season in the *Rutland Herald* did not include Post 6 as a contender among the twelve other teams listed. Then years later, during the late summer of 1975 a small group of Post 6 Legionnaires and interested citizens from the Proctor area gathered together to lay the groundwork to resurrect a Legion Baseball team. This was on the heels of the Proctor High School varsity baseball team notching three straight State Championships under the direction of Coach Wade Mitchell. The committee would spend several months meeting at the homes of committee members, or at the high school, or even at the ball field. According to a chronological time-line of pertinent events, which was preserved within the 1976 Awards Banquet Program, that first meeting took place on 18 August 1975. A month later, on September 19th, Lou Lertola was named as the Legion Athletic Director. As the October 16th meeting convened, the following officers were elected: Chairman – Adrian Curtis; Secretary-Treasurer – Marilyn DelBianco; Transportation Directors – Mr. & Mrs. Ed Keith; and the Grounds and Field Manager – ‘Polly’ Poljacik. Dick DelBianco volunteered to be the official score-keeper with the public address system being manned by Tim Curtis and Dave Buskey. Live radio broadcasting of the Post 6 games was aired by WHWB (AM) radio with Jack Healey and Carleton Laird doing the ‘play by play’ accounts. The needed uniforms and equipment were purchased through Mills & Greer on 4 December as the year was drawing to a close. The committee’s efforts were rewarded on 5 February 1975 as correspondence received from the American Legion Department of Vermont’s Legion Baseball Commissioner Webster was received, which acknowledged that the Post 6 had been accepted into the league.

Once again the Post 6 Legion Baseball organization had been successfully resurrected. The team would be guided under the direction of Coach Wade Mitchell.

However, he was definitely not a stranger to high school sports in Proctor. In addition, Wade had a solid background as a remarkable baseball talent. He was born on 12 August 1941 in the small community of Huntington, VT. He was educated at nearby Richmond High School, where he excelled in both basketball and baseball. Wade always considered baseball to be his favorite sport. He played four years of varsity baseball, where he was regarded as “one hell of a hitter”. In fact, his batting average for each of the four high school years was an incredible .500. In one tournament game he ripped five home runs at bat. During that four- year period, he could only recall Richmond High losing just one game. The loss was associated with a couple of errors made by the

Richmond third baseman. Curiously, that loss was to the Bristol High School, which was then coached by Bill Flory. Another special memory was created, when the Richmond High School team traveled a great distance to play against another high school team on Cape Cod. At the time, Wade's mother and his brother, Ben, lived in the West Yarmouth area, where his mother operated a small motel, the Great Island Motel. Between the three family members the concept of this game was conceived and brought into reality. More than one hundred citizens from the Richmond area journeyed to the Cape to watch their hometown team play against a team, which had earned the Cape Cod League championship a year earlier. The hometown crowd wasn't disappointed as the Richmond boys went on to a two to one victory. This was powered by a two hit performance from Wade: a double and then a triple, which knocked in the winning run.

While Wade was a standout slugger, he also was a remarkably strong pitcher; notching a total of eight 'no hitter' games. Seven of these were notched during high school play and one in college. His fastball speed had been estimated to exceed 95 mph! During the summer following his high school junior year, Wade was invited to play in the respectable Cape Cod League. Notwithstanding the fact that the Cape Cod League was reserved for college students, based on his incredible talent, and since his mother resided there, Wade was approved to play. He actually spent three years in the summer league there. In 1960, again while being a standout strong pitcher, he also led the league in batting with a strong .350 average. Major league baseball scouts keenly noted his performances. The New York Yankee organization was one of those clubs. Ultimately, Wade went on to sign with the Kansas City A's as a pitcher with a signing that took place just across the Vermont - Canada border. He played for two years until he was sidelined with 'Sandy Koufax Tendinitis'. Sadly, due to this injury, he was released from the team. Although he could have rejoined the club during the following year as a utility player, Wade elected to return to Vermont, where he married and started family life.

Initially, Wade spent some six years as the Recreation Director at Brandon Training School, where he met Robert Abrahamson from Proctor High School. Bob quizzed Wade about any interest he might have in coaching at Proctor High. The first step in that direction was taken, when Wade became a soccer referee. Ultimately, he went on to coach the boys' varsity baseball and basketball teams for eighteen years (1967 - 1985). He also became the first coach of the girls' basketball program; a position he held for four years. There he led the girls' team to its first state championship. In the early 1970s, the DelBianco family persuad-

ed Wade to contact Coach Bill Flory of the Post 31 team, and offer to assist him with the coaching duties. The two men met to discuss overall strategies and Wade's role. A mutually agreed concept allowed Wade complete control as the third base coach. Wade continued with these responsibilities through the completion of the 1975 season.

With the start of the 1976 Legion Baseball season, Wade found himself at the helm of the Proctor Post 6 Legion Team. Wade was assisted by Dave Buskey and Brian Jones with Bob Blanchard as the score-keeper. Post 6 could still draw potential players from Otter Valley Union High; West Rutland High; Middlebury Union; and Mt. Abraham (Bristol). According to Wade, the score-keeping system, that he developed had been described by *Rutland Herald* Sports Reporter, Chuck Clarino, as one of the best in America. It provided instant access to statistics and data; a concept that Wade introduced and shared with many coaches and score-keepers. His daily practice sessions for the team were executed with clockwork precision. They were scheduled for and lasted for exactly ninety minutes. As Wade noted, "The players' parents were truly glad as they knew when they could pick up their sons." It was wall-to-wall practice without any standing around, and there definitely wasn't any wasted time. As trained during practice drills, if there was any question as to who should make the catch of a fly ball, Wade would yell out the name of the player, whom he felt was best positioned to make the catch. Wade was considered by many to be one of the world's greatest fungo bat hitters, that is, the art of hitting balls during practice sessions for the players to field. When he retired from his Post 6 duties, Wade was presented with the fungo bat he used.

The 1976 season for the Post 6 team started with a two day Rutland Tournament. Post 6 bowed to Brattleboro Post 5 in its first game on 12 June by a score of sixteen to five. The following day the team went up against the ever-powerful Bennington Post 13 team and came away with an eighteen to five victory. In the first home field game, an 'Old Timers' tribute game, Post 6 once again went up against Bennington and lost by a four to one score. The team went on to debut in its Central Vermont League in a game against Woodstock, and came away victorious. Post 6 won the first five League games it played. In a very satisfying game, Post 6 beat Rutland Post 31 on 7 July by a close six to five score. The team's overall record for 1976 consisted of sixteen wins; fifteen losses; and one tie. After the season concluded, a celebration of the return of the Post 6 team was held on 21 August at the Proctor High School Gymnasium. Eight of the team members were honored with special awards: Tim Gallipo – Leading Hitter; Ed Keith – Most Improved; Rob DelBianco – Best Defensive; Lou Lertola – Sportsmanship; Randy

Dorr – Coach's Award; Rick DelBianco – Pitching; Stephen Poljacik – MVP; and Jim Lemnah – Most RBI's/Batting.



Award winners (l to r): Tim Gallipo, Steve Poljacik, Ed Keith, Lou Lertola, Randy Dorr, Rick DelBianco, and Rob DelBianco. Jim Lemnah was not in the picture.

One special game, which Wade recalled, was played against Rutland Post 31 at Warner Field. It was a particularly important game, which drew the largest crowd of spectators that Wade had ever seen at a Legion game; perhaps more than a thousand people. Wade had devised a special signaling technique to communicate with his pitcher on the mound, Rick DelBianco. However, whenever, DelBianco flashed back a signal to Wade in the dugout, Post 31 Coach Bill Flory would yell "balk". Home-plate umpire, Robert 'Dike' Dikeman, ignored the shouts from Coach Flory for several of these episodes. Then with one final protest from Coach Flory, 'Dike' called the balk. Immediately, Wade jumped to his feet and went out to confront Dikeman. He felt that 'Dike' knew that he had made a mistake with the call. None-the-less, Dikeman stood his ground and tried to calm down the agitated Coach Mitchell, but to no avail. Dike said, "Wade, just go back to the dugout, and let's get this behind us...or I'll throw you out of the game!" However, Wade was definitely not interested in Dikeman's plea. He quickly responded, "If you want me to leave, the only way I'm going is if you do throw me out. I want you to throw me out." With those words, Dikeman wasted little time in putting Wade out of the game. Wade noted that the incident was the first and only time, when he had been ejected from a game. Moreover, both he and Dikeman remained friends for the many years

that followed the ejection. Wade had a reputation of being one of foremost knowledgeable authorities on baseball rules. In fact, an umpire of that era, Carl Rice, suggested to other umpires, "Get the rules book out and study it the night before any games that Wade Mitchell will be coaching..." Any challenges to an umpire's call by Wade were likely to be justified.

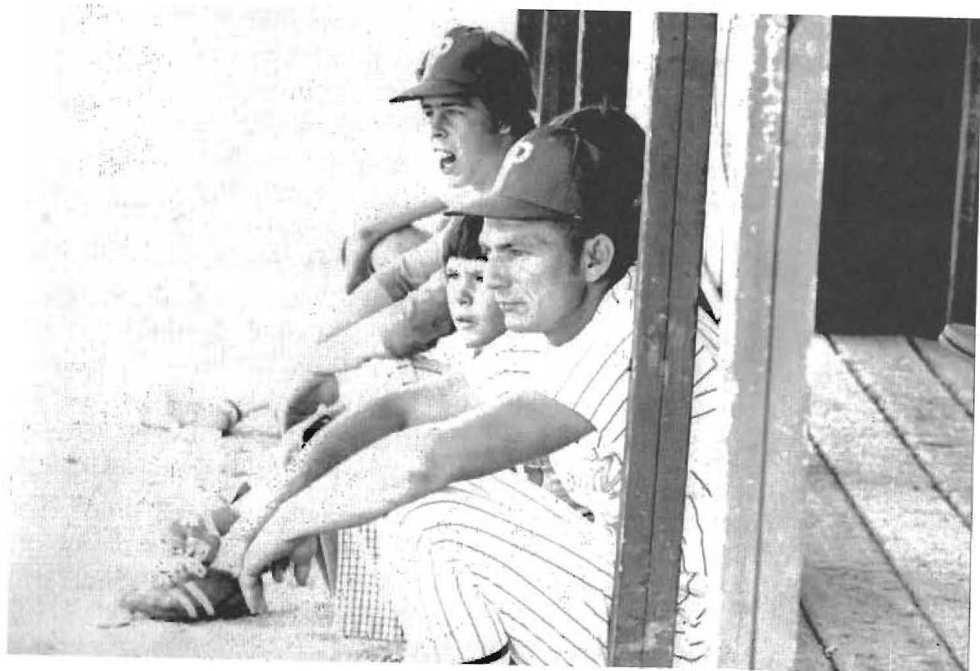


Proctor Post 6 Legion Baseball team at Warner Field about 1976. Head Coach Wade Mitchell at the right.

Wade led the 'Sixers' through three Legion Baseball seasons. During his final year, 1978, the team compiled a record of 14 wins and six losses. The 'Sixers' finished that year holding second place in the Central Division. Finally after three years of coaching the Post 6 team, Wade opted to step down from that position. Thereby, Mitchell was able to devote and focus his efforts on the Proctor High School teams. Then in 1986, when a requested budget consideration was rejected, in one of the most difficult decisions that Wade made in his life, he left Proctor High School and moved on to assume the varsity coaching duties at Otter Valley Union High School. Two of Wade's sons would subsequently, play for Post 6 in the early 1980s as team members from Otter Valley Union. His son Tim was a pitcher; while Terry was a catcher. In 2012, the Vermont Principals Association honored Wade Mitchell by inducting him into its Hall of Fame. Wade reflected on his many years of coaching as being filled with "... many great moments... many fun moments..." Wade had preserved many of the photographs, news clippings, and other memorabilia from his years at the helm of Post 6, which he kept at a family camp in Huntington. Unfortunately, in what



Proctor Post 6 Legion Baseball team at Warner Field about 1976. (Top) Head Coach Wade Mitchell gives directions to the team. Joe Stratton is the player to his right. (Bottom) Head Coach Wade Mitchell sits pensively in he dugout.



appeared to be an act of arson, the camp and these baseball and coaching treasures perished one day in a horrific 2 AM blaze.

As the 1979 Legion Baseball season opened, the Post 6 team found itself with a new head coach, Dave Buskey. Coach Buskey was assisted by Rick DelBianco who had played under Coach Wade Mitchell. This duo would guide the 'Sixers' for only one season. The first game in 1979 had the Post 6 team facing off against Post 37 from Bellows Falls. With some strong pitching by Scott Poljacik, Post 6 shut out Post 37 by a score of three to nothing on 15 June. Two days later they dropped both hard fought games of an exciting double header to Bennington Post 13 with scores of four to two and three to two.

With the start of the 1980 Legion Baseball season, yet another new face emerged as the coach of the Post 6 team. This was an individual named Steve Houghton. Rick DelBianco remained on board to assist with the coaching responsibilities. Part of the 1980 pitching squad was composed of Don Duchus and Charlie Hughes. Their catcher was Chet Godrick with a backup catcher named, Scott Poljacik. The outfielders included Mark Poljacik, Pat Curtis, Greg Curtis, and Dave Flory. In the season opener the team went up against Bennington Post 13 and dropped two games of the double-header by scores of five to four and three to one. Then they played against the Rutland Post 31 powerhouse, which hadn't lost a game. The 'Sixers' once again were defeated with a score of sixteen to nine. The Post 6 team turned things around on 22 June, taking two games from the Windsor Legion team with Charlie Hughes providing some strong pitching. As June of 1980 was drawing to a close, Post 6 topped Fair Haven by a three to one score.

A few years later, in 1982, Robert Jalbert assumed the coaching duties. Jalbert was a Vermont State Police Officer, who ultimately served more than twenty years with the Department. However, there was also another major change to what had been the Post 6 Legion Baseball program. Under Jalbert the team, which had been so long known and recognized as 'Post 6' or the 'Sixers', was transformed and renamed the "Tri-Town Independents". The name was obviously intended to highlight those towns from which the players typically came: Proctor, Pittsford, and West Rutland. It is not clear with the name change whether or not the baseball program was still under the auspices of the tiny American Legion Post in Proctor.

The Tri-Town Independents played under Coach Jalbert for a few years, when a somewhat peculiar set of circumstances took place. The "Independents" opening game on 13 June 1985 against Rutland Post 31 was postponed due to inclement weather. The rescheduled game was played on 17 June. Coach Jalbert had Jimmy Reissig on the mound with the pitching duties. However, the always strong Post 31 club

defeated the "Independents" by a score of six to two. The two runs of the "Tri-Towns" came off the bat of Terry Mitchell, who slugged a two run homer. Immediately following the game Coach Jalbert announced that he was resigning as coach, citing a heavy job workload. The control of the team was handed over to Brian Jalbert for a short time. Just over a week later the "Independents" were able to defeat neighboring Fair Haven by a score of six to three with some strong pitching provided by David Mills. It appeared that by then, Willie Poljacik and Earle 'Skip' Goodrich had moved in to coach the team. However, following a subsequent outburst of requests for his return by parents and players, Bob Jalbert reassumed coaching duties on 28 June 1985. This was just in time as the "Independents" were hosting their First Annual Tri-Town Round Robin Tournament at Warner Field. Unfortunately, Tri-Town dropped both of its tournament games: losing to Plattsburgh by a seven to one score, and then to Fair Haven by a score of six to nothing. Moreover, what had been billed as the 'First Annual Tri-Town Round Robin Tournament actually would be the only such event. As the 1986 Legion Baseball season was set to open in June of that year, Coach Jalbert came forward with a sad announcement that due to a lack of any interested players, the Tri-Town Independents Baseball program was being discontinued. It was the third Legion Team to disappear in 1986. It was the final pitch; the last swing; the third strike; and the final out for a program that for the better part of thirty-five years had placed a summer baseball team on Warner Field in Proctor.

Then with a 'Final Salute' some five years later in 1991, also due to a declining membership, the tiny American Legion Post 6 was forced to close its doors forever as well.

The Last Pitch

Award winning sportscaster Jack Healey of WSYB Radio shared some special memories of Post 6 teams during the Wade Mitchell era (1976-1978).

"Those Proctor Post 6 teams were around for a short time, but what a cast of characters! There were simply too many to mention them all, but you can certainly start with the coach, Wade Mitchell. First off, he knows baseball more than anyone I've ever known, but he was a colorful character too.

"Another colorful character was Kirk Abrahamson. One game I recall was Proctor playing at Fair Haven. Kirk was playing right field, when a fly ball was hit in his direction. It was a routine fly ball, but Kirk somehow turned it into a more than average play. He circled and stag-

gered around and around before making a spectacular diving catch for the final out of the inning. As Kirk trotted in toward the bench, Coach Mitchell met him halfway and said to him, "It wasn't the sun, it ain't raining, what was your problem?" Kirk's matter of fact reply was simply, "I got a bug in my eye."

Yes, there were characters, but they could play baseball. There were players from Proctor, West Rutland and Otter Valley. Proctor and West Rutland as you know were and still are bitter rivals. Many players on the Proctor Post 6 club had played against each other in high school, including the Proctor-West Rutland boy's basketball championship game in March of 1976. Despite the school rivalries, they were great friends in Legion Baseball!

In the second year of Coach Wade's leadership (1977), the team visited the baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. I was one of the chaperones. (I use that term loosely!) What a time we had, and it wasn't all baseball!

What a cast of characters! The St. Louis Cardinals 'Gashouse Gang' of 1934 had nothing on Proctor Post 6!"

All photos courtesy of the author.

A Few of Those Who Shared Their Memories



John Anderson



Bob Curtis



Bob Eugair



Jack Flood



Bill Flory



Charlie 'Jolly' Rogers

A Partial List of Coaches and Players of Post 6 American Legion Baseball Teams

Kirk Abrahamson
Billy Allard
John Anderson
Kevin Austin
Bill Benham
Bill Boutwell
Bob Burney
Bob Bushey
Ray Bushey
Bob Buskey
Jimmy Candon
John Dynan Candon
Hank Champine
Terry Champine
Al Curtis
Greg Curtis
Pat Curtis
Robert 'Curt' Curtis
Richard DelBianco
Rick DelBianco
Rob DelBianco
Randy Dorr
Don Dunchus
Bill Duprey
Robert 'Bob' Eugair
John 'Jack' Flood
Dave Flory
Tim Gallipo
Donald Gallus
Dick Gecha
John Gecha
Chet Godrick
Earle 'Skip' Goodrich
Robert 'Bobby' Greene
Gary Gurbacs
Jimmy Higgins
Steve Houghton
Charlie Hughes

Bob Illinski
Mike Illinski
Robert Jalbert
Brian Jones
Ed Keith
Bob Landon
Jim Lemnah
Lou Lertola
Tom Lertola
Bobby Mezzetta
Dave Mills
Terry Mitchell
Tim Mitchell
Wade Mitchell
Peter Navari
Raymond 'Bunny' Olson
Raymond 'Lefty' Olson
Lee Orvis
Jim Palmer
Edmund Pentkowski
Raymond Pentkowski
Theodore Pentkowski
Theodore 'Teddy' Pentkowski
John R. Poljacik Sr.
John Poljacik Jr.
Mark Poljacik
Scott Polcjacik
Stephen Poljacik
Bernie Poremski
David Ratti
John Ratti
David Reissig
Jimmy Reissig
Charlie 'Jolly' Rogers
Dave Shortsleeve
Herb Spaulding
Ron Woods